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A bad neighborhood at 2a.m.—the view from Liddy's lectern

By Tom Nugent

Outside the Towson restaurant, a black limousine waited in the rain.

It was twilight. Like 10 million slanting silver daggers, the rain went knifing through the headlights of the limousine. Beneath the glowing street lamps, jagged black shadows gnawed away at the failing light. Overcoats buttoned tightly against the damp chill, a few pedestrians hurried through the gathering murk toward the room where he waited to greet them.

It was Sunday night, and a dark and enigmatic figure from the past had descended on suburban Towson.

Now a curious pedestrian approached the limousine. "Who are you waiting for?" he asked the driver. "Are you waiting for G. Gordon Liddy?"

Poker-faced, the driver gazed carefully into the middle distance.

"I'm not allowed to tell you that," he said.

Silence. Mystery.

Only the wind hissing along the deserted street. Only the parked limousine, its engine purring softly in the rainy darkness. . . .

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Inside the restaurant, he waited in a room dominated by six huge mirrors and an ice bucket full of bottles of wine.

When he turned to answer a question from one of the fresh-faced, innocent looking Towson State University students, you could see him turning in all of the mirrors. You could see six G. Gordon Liddys, and six Watergate burglars-turned-authors-lecturers, and six famous celebrities attending an elegant, wine-and-cheese reception before going on to address a crowded hall of college students.

"I exhausted my memory with respect to Watergate," he said, describing a book ("Will," St. Martin's Press) he had written about his famous adventures as a Republican burglar in 1972. "But I still have secrets in my head, so to speak, that I may not speak of."

He paused. The famous mustache, coal-black and stiff as a carpet sweeper, gleamed for a moment in one of the mirrors. "They are things I had access to when I was a member of the White House staff, and had a security clearance from the CIA. . . ."

Silence, then. Mystery. A bystander wondered how much G. Gordon Liddy was being paid for these appearances on the college lecture circuit. Was the reported figure of $8,000 accurate? He turned. His smile might have been a newly sharpened stiletto. Yes, that figure sounded close . . . but of course, his New York agent would get most of that sum—G. Gordon, himself, would get only what "dribbled down."

They were taking his photograph from every direction, by now. Again and again, the flashbulbs sent jagged forks of dwarf-lightning through the gleaming mirrors. "When you enter the arena," G. Gordon said, explaining why he has never considered himself to be a criminal, "you fight by the rules that attain therein. The rules of the arena! And I can recall very well, as an FBI agent [earlier in his career], investigating the [political] 'dirty tricks' that were being played by [John F.] Kennedy."

He had simply done his duty, he said, invoking a familiar line of defense; like a good soldier, G. Gordon Liddy had simply followed orders.

Then he talked for a while about his new life on the lecture circuit. He talked, in particular, about his widely publicized debates with former LSD guru Dr. Timothy Leary—the same Dr. Timothy Leary whom he had once busted on drug charges, while serving as an assistant district attorney in New York's upstate Dutchess county: "He's a lot of fun to be with. He's got a very easygoing manner, which makes it very easy for him to get away with saying the most outrageous things.

"I take 'The Power of the State' [in the debates], and he takes 'The Freedom of the Individual,' and we just go at it."

After that, the veteran of 4½ years in federal prisons returned to one of his favorite themes: American military weakness in the face of Soviet might. "President Reagan wants to do the right thing," he said, "but whether or not Congress will permit him to do the right thing is something else again."

Then, after pointing out that efforts to slash defense spending can't really save us much money, anyway, he intoned: "If you were to cancel tomorrow the B-1 bomber, the M-1 Abrams tank, the Apache helicopter, the new infantry armored personnel carriers and both nuclear carriers—your net savings in 1983 would only be five billion! Because they're amortized over a 10-year period, and there's no way you can really affect individual per annum expenditures by cutting."

Interesting. But the hour was growing late; nervously, the representatives from the Towson State Student Government Association were edging him toward the door—and toward the big auditorium where perhaps a thousand people waited to hear his speech.

"We just had dinner with him," said one of these representatives, a senior majoring in business management named Mark Snidero, "and he's different than I thought. He's very personable. He's a very nice man, very open about everything. I don't think of him as a weirdo, a crazy or lunatic.

"I think of him . . . not as heroic,

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but very patriotic. He has a lot of characteristics that I'd like to have. Like overcoming his fears, and being a very strong person."

G. Gordon Liddy as patriot?

"Personally," said Mr. Snidero, "I feel that he backed the president of the United States. Like a sergeant in the Army, he says: 'I want you to do this,' and you do it."

"Aside from the moral implications of what he did," said another member of the SGA, "he was a genius."

After that, we all walked through the rain to the auditorium.

In the lobby, a big crowd was waiting for the action to begin. "I think he's probably one of the most colorful characters to come out of Watergate," said a Social Security Administration executive named Charles Carper. "He just seems a totally unique person. Someone who'll go down in history.

"I've got to find out if this guy is real. I can't believe that there's a guy walking around with this kind of philosophy. Ultra-macho! 'I'll meet you on any street corner—shoot me!' Putting his hand in a candle flame! He makes John Wayne look like a hostess!"

A Baltimore dentist named Dr. Adrian J. Van Oss was also waiting for the show to begin. "We read the book and enjoyed it," said the doctor, "so we thought it would be a good lecture. He's an unusual character."

"I think it [Watergate] was political expediency," said the dentist's wife, Rusty, after hinting that there might have been more to the scandal than the public has ever learned. "I don't really think it was a burglary, at all. It was political expediency for the Democrats. . . . I don't think Nixon was a very popular president."

But then her husband raised a hand: "The truth of the matter is there's no [professional] football, and you get tired of TV! It's just something to do. . . ."

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He was very good.

He zoomed onstage after the introduction, and began to adjust the microphone hanging from his collar: "I have to do this very carefully because I always seem to have trouble with microphones!"

They roared.

Then G. Gordon Liddy went into his main pitch. For more than an hour, he warned the hundreds who had gathered in the auditorium that they were living in a world of "illusion." Like most Americans, they were living inside a false bubble of security. They thought, for example, that government ran the way it does in the textbooks (with strict adherence to the U.S. Constitution, and without "dirty tricks"); they thought that clandestine intelligence operations should not require killing innocent people from time to time (regrettable as these are, they do happen); they had not accepted the idea that it's dog-eat-dog out there, and that it's every man for himself.

Above all, of course, they had not realized that the Russians were preparing to devour them.

"The world is not Chevy Chase!" he raged, striding back and forth along the platform, "and the world is not Palm Beach! The world is a very bad neighborhood at 2 a.m.!"

Back and forth he went. He talked very fast, and he jabbed the air; his dark, sharply creased suit looked as if it had been quick-frozen to his slender frame. Firing off a barrage of one-liners, he attacked the judge who had sentenced him to prison for Watergate ("He's got a room temperature I.Q."); he attacked the *Washington Post* ("There was no single Deep Throat; he was yet another example of composite journalism by the masters of composite journalism"); he attacked one of the wardens at one of the prisons where he had stayed—explaining that he had even managed to bug his office, in order to win a strategic battle with the prison brass.

The performance was vivid, energetic, hilarious—and so fast-paced that it was like watching Groucho Marx on speed.

But he said very little, actually, about Watergate. He answered a few brief questions, most of them neutral, and then waved. "You're a great audience," he told them, "thanks a lot!"

Perhaps one-fourth of the house rose to give him a standing ovation.

If nothing else, he had told them, they'd learned "how government really works, instead of the Holiday Inn version, with the sanitized strip in the bathroom."

A few minutes later, during a brief press conference, he defended the burglaries and the "dirty tricks" by saying that "virtually every president of the United States has, when he believed it necessary for the good of the country, violated the law or the Constitution."

Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln . . . they were lawbreakers every one!

But what else would you expect, living as we do in a very bad neighborhood at 2 a.m.?